

HOW TO MAKE THINGS NULL AND VOID

An Essay-Review of Brian Inglis's *Natural and Supernatural*¹

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The physicist Max Planck once remarked that the way a new idea makes its way in science is not by demonstration but because its opponents eventually die off. That this fails to hold in the case of psychical research is one of the peculiar facts of its history. Numbers of generations of its opponents (the history of the subject goes back to ancient times) have come and gone, with new ones coming up all the time, like dragons' teeth. The dismal record of this never-ending fiasco—the complete and ignominious failure of the real core of psychical research to gain the kind of hearing it deserves, not only among the scientists but to a great extent among those professedly dedicated to its investigation, namely, the psychic researchers themselves—is presented in highly readable, scholarly fashion in Brian Inglis's *Natural and Supernatural*. Although the material dealt with, mainly of the spontaneous variety, ends with the beginning of World War I in 1914, nothing that has happened since—despite the faint note of hope in Inglis's final paragraph about J. B. Rhine's entrance upon the “long and often bitter struggle to obtain scientific recognition and acceptance” (and the fluke of the Parapsychological Association's recent affiliation with the AAAS)—has altered the basic fact of the virtually solid wall of scientific opposition to the existence of the so-called paranormal.

The completely enigmatic aspect of this continuing state of affairs is underscored by the wealth of material presented in historical context in this book, from Biblical times and the early civilizations through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Age of Reason, to the twentieth century. How can it be that such a well-defined universe of mental and physical events defying normal explanation—some of them even susceptible to experimental investigation and control, which year after year, decade after decade, century after century continue to fall into the same phenomenological categories and which in every age have been attested to by persons of eminence in every field of endeavor—can still be put down solely to misin-

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terpretation, malobservation, exaggeration or fraud, or, for that matter, simply ignored? The record nevertheless shows little change in the arguments of the skeptics from ancient times to the present. Cicero, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal of his day (the first century B.C.) scathingly derided the ludicrous beliefs in the supernatural that were taking increasing hold among "intelligent men." There never had been a case of foreknowledge, he declared, which could not be explained by natural means, and he questioned the veracity of those vouching for marvels of one kind or another. "With only slight changes," writes Inglis, "*De Divinatione* [Cicero's broadside against oracles and stories of unaccountable happenings] might have been written by a nineteenth-century sceptic following Voltaire and Hume." It could also have been written by any number of twentieth-century skeptics. There is little difference between Cicero's contention that exaggerated claims of the supernatural were "overturning the whole system of physics" and "should not be admitted to philosophical discussion" and the conventional arguments of those today who militate against the admission of parapsychology courses to university curricula, or, as is now happening increasingly, who press for the drumming-out of those that may somehow have squeaked through. Or the arguments of John A. Wheeler (1979), a much publicized theoretical physicist and former president of the American Physical Society, who recently suggested that parapsychology be voted out of the AAAS. "Every science that is a science has hundreds of hard results," he wrote in a prepared paper given at the January 1979 AAAS meeting in Houston, "but search fails to turn up a single one in 'parapsychology.'"

Inglis's book is full of basically similar statements by pundits in between Cicero, one century B. C., and Wheeler, one century before God-knows-what, who are just as implacable in their defense of some kind of transcendental orthodoxy—the Faradays, the Huxleys, the Tyndalls. (Inglis, curiously, makes no mention of the great Helmholtz and his notorious pronouncement that "neither the testimony of all the Fellows of the Royal Society nor the evidence of my own senses could ever lead me to believe in [what is] clearly impossible.") But the matter goes far deeper. The sad fact—which Inglis does not shirk—is the every whit as irrational stands taken by the Sidgwick and other members of the early SPR when it came to physical phenomena (which for some reason they regarded as the Trojan Horse of the spiritualists) and psychics like Eglinton, Slade, Pal-

ladino, and others who, they felt, could not be depended upon to behave with the rectitude and reliability expected of upper-crust mid-Victorians. Moreover, according to Inglis, the unbecoming disregard for fact, fairness, and logic which on occasion characterized the behavior of some of the early members of the SPR did not always stop this side of what could only be called flagrant dishonesty in the treatment of unpalatable data. If later opponents of the paranormal were guilty of rigging evidence to fit a preconceived thesis, "it was Hodgson, Podmore and other members of the SPR," writes Inglis (p. 448), "who showed them how." Podmore, according to Inglis, simply declined to credit levitations (notwithstanding William Crookes's having declared in an 1874 article in the *Quarterly Journal of Science* that there were "at least a hundred recorded instances of Mr. Home's rising from the ground in the presence of as many separate persons . . ."). Podmore assumed, Inglis continues, that "they must be the result of fraud or hallucination—as Mrs. Sidgwick (though she claimed to keep an open mind) . . . would have agreed. So far from providing a counterweight to the skeptics, the Society in this period might almost have been described as their ally" (p. 448).

It is true that during this early period mental and physical mediumship flourished as never before or since; and psychical researchers, confronted on every side with thoroughgoing or episodic fraudulence, had to wallow in an unavoidable confusion about the peculiar logic of their subject matter and the investigative strategies to be employed. Generations later, however, confusion (or is it something deeper?) seems to have abated but little. It has simply taken a different turn. The keynote to Inglis's book (if there can be said to be one at all in such a rich and varied assortment of accounts of the paranormal) is surely his numerous citations of eyewitness accounts of paranormal physical occurrences, from apports and poltergeist phenomena to the partial and full materializations and dematerializations of D. D. Home, Moses, Palladino, Florence Cook, and others. (The back dust cover of *Natural and Supernatural* shows a frock-coated gentleman, presumably Home, poised vertically in midair with his head grazing the ceiling, while half a dozen similarly frocked-coated gentlemen, one looking as if he had just fallen back into a chair, are looking up at him with expressions of total amazement.) Some of these accounts—those that haven't been lost from view altogether, at any rate—have now become part of the folklore of parapsychology. But they have in the main lost whatever status of factuality they may ever have had; and if they are mentioned at all in

modern texts, they are apt to be referred to slightly, if indeed not wholly negatively. With few exceptions (notably Nicol, 1977) they have not been accepted as grounds for anything like a firm conclusion that something like psychokinesis actually exists (Dingwall, 1962 a, 1962 b; Flew, 1953; Murphy, 1961; Pratt, 1960; Rhine, 1970). And even when a daring parapsychologist does accept the validity of selected ones, his resistance to letting PK off the leash as a *working* fact may be all but unconquerable. Thus, in 1951, C. J. Ducasse, one of the most justly honored philosophical intellects in the field, after reviewing the evidence on the variegated physical phenomena of D. D. Home as reported by Crookes, asked whether "any person that owns allegiance to the recognized criteria of dependable evidence has any rational right *not* to believe [such reports]" (p. 137). And in 1954, after referring to "the experimental demonstrations of telekinesis by statistical treatment of long series of carefully controlled and recorded dice-castings," he wrote, "If I were told—let us suppose by the Chairman of our Program Committee . . . that, in his own dining-room and in good light, he had seen Prof. Rhine rise 18 inches in the air, and that, as Crookes did with Home, he passed his hand under, above, and around Rhine and found nothing, then such a report would be even more convincing both psychologically and rationally than are reports of the results of dice-casting experiments" (p. 822). Nevertheless, when it came down to applying the PK hypothesis to a specific problem—that is, to considering the possibility that whatever it is behind the gross paranormal physical manifestations of the few could conceivably operate on an unconscious and unobtrusive level in others (perhaps in all)—Ducasse backpeddled just as fast as he could. In 1961, having in the meanwhile been President of the Philosophy of Science Association, the only available evidence he found to justify the application of the PK hypothesis to the problem of spontaneously occurring apparent precognition (that is, to the conceivable role of PK in bringing events into alignment with certain prior representations of them) was "the thin fact that . . . in some of the long series of dice-casting experiments, a correlation slightly higher than was to be expected from chance alone has been found between the experimenter's *conscious volition* that certain die faces should turn up, and the frequency with which they actually turn up" (Ducasse et al., p. 176).

Ducasse's inability to capitalize on the enormous potential of D. D. Home's considerable variety of manifestations, and what amounts to his puzzling about-face, is reminiscent of the curious

ending of one of the cases cited by Inglis (pp. 184-186) from the *Zoist*, a short-lived (1846-1853) and most undeservedly unread journal "of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism," as its subtitle goes. The case was that of Angélique Cottin, a 14-year-old French country girl. It seemed that just about everything Angélique touched or came near jumped, danced, floated, or flung itself about, often to the accompaniment of cold breezes. She was finally sent to Paris for investigation by the French Academy of Science. The academician who carried out the preliminary investigation in 1846 reported: "A large and heavy sofa upon which I was seated was pushed with great force against the wall the moment the girl came to seat herself by me. A chair was held fast upon the floor by strong men, and I was seated on it in such a way as to occupy only half the seat; it was forcibly wrenched from me as soon as the young girl sat down on the other half." When similar observations were made by one of the most eminent astronomers and physicists of France, who was specially called in, "the Academy had no choice but to set up a formal committee of inquiry." But when tests carried out over the next five days were unproductive, the decision was made to deem the original reports "null and void" (p. 186).

Now Ducasse did not nullify or void his original position on PK in so many words. But there are many ways of rendering something null and void without actually declaring it to be so. Some of these are commonly encountered in normal psychology, and only magnified in psychopathology (and politics). All you have to do is to isolate a fact by not seeing its connections in various possible contexts while looking straight at it; or we do a fact to death through overabstraction while stripping it clean of all its uncouth particulars; or, as is mostly the case in parapsychology, we "undo" a fact by recognizing it in a dim sort of way while putting it as fast as possible into the fading and innocuous past, making effectually as if it had never happened. This is somewhat akin to what was once referred to as "the evaporation trend" (Scriven, 1961). Of the many cases of physical paranormality cited by Inglis, all of which at one time, apparently, had (at least to some persons) the quality of actuality that we come to associate with the term "fact," few—maybe only those of D. D. Home and Palladino (Beloff, 1977) and some of the poltergeist cases (and these last only because of their modern day equivalents) have weathered this kind of nullification and voidance to any degree at all.

Surely, however, we must have some criteria of credibility. Can we be expected to accept as factual every case cited by Inglis? Cer-

tainly not. It is nevertheless disheartening to see how many cases have gone into virtual oblivion and have been lost to use both in our image of what parapsychology is all about and in our theoretical doodlings because we have allowed ourselves to become speciously one-sided in our criteria of credibility—have in effect tacitly allowed these criteria to develop by default. Take, for example, the admittedly bizarre case of Joseph (later Saint Joseph) of Copertino, which Inglis presents, along with several similar cases, in some detail (pp. 104-108). Most of the numerous eyewitness accounts of Joseph's rapture-induced "flights" are taken from the ecclesiastical records, which apparently began to be compiled during Joseph's lifetime (he died in 1663) since it was perfectly clear to everyone, the Pope included, that the question of Joseph's canonization would almost automatically arise upon his death. Some of these accounts are given in Thurston's *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952) and in Dingwall's awesomely scholarly chapter on "The Friar Who Flew" in his *Some Human Oddities* (1962b), from which Inglis seems to have derived much of his material. According to these accounts Joseph was the Superman of his day. He did not just levitate but would take to the air in "flights" that might well have been the envy of the Wright brothers. One account, quoted by Inglis (p. 105), goes:

Suddenly he gave a sob, then a great cry, and at the same time he was raised in the air, flying from the middle of the church to the high altar, where he embraced the tabernacle. Now, from the middle of the church to the high altar, the distance is about forty feet. A most wonderful thing is that the altar being covered with lighted candles, Brother Joseph flew and alighted among those candles and threw down neither a candle nor a candlestick. He remained thus about a quarter of an hour, kneeling and embracing the tabernacle, and then came down without being helped by anybody and did not disturb anything.

On apparently another occasion and in another church, something of the same sort took place, according to Dingwall (1962b, p. 12).

Suddenly he rose up into the air, and with a cry flew in the upright position to the altar with his hands outstretched as on a cross, and alighted upon it in the middle of the flowers and candles which were burning in profusion. The nuns of St. Ligorio, who were observing each one of his acts and movements, and saw him first in the air and later among the burning candles, cried out loudly: "He will catch fire! He will catch fire!" But Fr. Ludovico, his companion, who was present and who made a statement in the Process [the ecclesiastical record of the case] and who was accustomed to such sights, told the nuns not to lack faith as he would not burn himself.

On many occasions, according to witnesses, crowds would collect

as Joseph, visibly enraptured, would perch high in some tree or in or on some building for a quarter or half an hour. (Business in the neighborhood must have come to a virtual standstill.) Oftentimes there would be no evidence from anything like disarranged garments that he had been in movement, much less soaring through the air. (He was almost invariably seen in flight, not just at some terminus to which he might have transported himself.) The folds and cowl of his habit would remain as if he were standing still.

Now accounts like this, as Inglis brings out, did not always come from persons who were in favor of such startling manifestations. In fact, the Church, traditionally conservative about alleged "miracles," was thoroughly embarrassed by such presumptive indications of special grace in one who was generally regarded as a bit soft in the head (and whose odor of sanctity must at times, what with Joseph's multiple festering sores produced by continual self-scourging, have been somewhat oppressive). Nevertheless, many churchmen—bishops, cardinals, the Pope himself ("Granted an audience at the Vatican, Joseph was so moved that he took off in the middle of it and remained aloft until ordered by his Superior to come down.")—joined scores of other witnesses (dukes, ambassadors, admirals among them) in testifying to Joseph's aerial transports. As a result Dingwall himself, whose talents as Devil's Advocate are well recognized and highly esteemed in psychical research, and who seems to have thoroughly familiarized himself with the profusion of multilingual volumes relating to Joseph's case, has difficulty picking loopholes in the evidence, even with the aid of one or two other "Promoters of the Faith" whom he puts on the witness stand. (*Promotor Fidei* is the term used for the ecclesiastical authority given the role of trying to tear to pieces testimony relating to an alleged miracle.) He can offer little more than lame observations such as that the Church has, after all, been known to have produced some bloopers (or what at least Dingwall assumes to be such); that persons have been able to simulate levitation through extreme agility and in fact through perfectly ordinary contrivances cleverly used to produce the illusion of unsupported height; and that, finally, since levitation seems to have gone out of fashion, even with saints, one can only view cautiously old accounts of inherently improbable occurrences. Despite this, and although he writes, "For my own part, I do not find it easy to believe that Cardinals, Bishops, Superiors, monastic physicians and lay visitors were all lying or engaged in a system of deceit for the purpose of bolstering up the reputation of a fraudulent friar or the Order to

which he was attached," and even though he presents a picture of Joseph, who was in a chronic state of inanition from constant fasting, as scarcely capable of agile leaps (or, for that matter, of contriving the illusion of such), he feels that he has no course but to refuse the final hurdle. Like the British judge who ruled against the medium Henry Slade in 1876 on the ground that he could do no other than go along with "the well-known course of nature" (Inglis, p. 281), Dingwall, in his appendix to Joseph's case (1962 b), can conclude only that "we are still in doubt as to whether such a phenomenon as the levitation of the human body ever occurs without some form of artificial aid" (p. 165).

The chips are down. Do we align ourselves with Dingwall here? Apparently we do, since the case of Joseph of Copertino has no status in the thoughtful literature of parapsychology and I suspect may be one of the "spontaneous occurrences" referred to on page one of L. E. Rhine's *Mind over Matter* as "too obscure, too 'wild,' too widely open to question" to be taken seriously. But on what grounds do we toss this case out? Do we say, going the judge in the Slade case (and philosopher David Hume himself) one better, that the data do not go along with the "well-known course of psi phenomena"? But everything in the course of spontaneously occurring psi points to a certain likelihood that sooner or later, as in the case of the four-minute mile, someone like Joseph of Copertino would come along. The thing about psi is that if it exists at all it very likely exists all the way and that, from the standpoint of the sheer existence of the phenomenon, nothing is more inherently improbable (Dingwall's question-begging on the issue of the Church's bloopers notwithstanding) than anything else. At the most some things occur less frequently and are for this reason psychologically more difficult to swallow. I have a feeling that if there were a psi God, his first commandment would be "Thou shalt not set my limits in vain."

Do we hear, now, that all human testimony is inherently and incorrigibly unreliable (a misapplication of the conclusions of Hodgson and Davey's paper in the 1887 *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* on the falsifiability of certain kinds of eyewitness testimony)? Very well, then we have to throw out all reports of laboratory experimentation. On some level they are, after all, merely eyewitness reports and are by no means necessarily more reliable than reports of spontaneous occurrences. If anything, in fact, insofar as they may depend upon notation and instrumentation (and even granting equal honesty in the reporters), they could be less reliable

than the kind of direct sensuous experience reported upon in the Joseph of Copertino case. As far as I know, moreover, there is no report of a single laboratory occurrence or experiment in parapsychology that has been attested to by as many observers, in many instances acting independently of each other, as in the Joseph case. (One that has on occasion been put forth—even by me [1954]—as having enjoyed this advantage has recently “evaporated” [Markwick, 1978].)

What now, about the remoteness of the period from which the testimony of the Joseph case comes? Is there something like a natural cutoff point? In effect there seems to be. But if there is an inherent obsolescence of all factual data then all history, as Henry Ford insisted, is “bunk,” and clearly nothing, including the most finely honed laboratory report, will survive. If Brother Joseph goes, so also, sooner or later, will everything that has ever been done since the so-called scientific era of psychical research began.

In his Presidential Address to the British Association in 1898, William (by now Sir William) Crookes, courageously referring to his work a quarter of a century earlier with D. D. Home and Florence Cook, declared “I have nothing to retract” (Crookes, 1962, p. 130). He needn’t have bothered. We have done it for him. And we have as good as effected the retraction of the accounts of paranormal physical phenomena of hundreds of witnesses, many of which, if read in the original, have the immediately recognizable ring of truth—or, as Inglis put it in one instance, are without “a false note” anywhere. These may not be the “hard” facts demanded by science, but, pulsing with life, purpose, intelligence, they are the heartbeat of psychical research.

If there is a message to be learned from this story it is surely not that we ought to dispense with experimental method, or thrust ourselves forward at AAAS meetings with accounts of Joseph of Copertino or of dining-room tables which jump up and down keeping time to floating accordions playing “The Last Rose of Summer” and “Ye Banks and Braes,” accompanied in full light by “a man’s rich voice . . . and a bird whistling and chirping” (a composite of some of the material presented in 1889 by Crookes in his now totally neglected “Notes of Séances with D. D. Home”). It is simply that, after decades of possibly “paddling in the shallows,” as G. N. M. Tyrrell put it in one of his books, the need to take new soundings and get our bearings may be more urgent than ever before. To find that our ablest theoreticians are just now arriving at conceptions (e.g., that psi is

unitary and goal directed) that even cursory attention to spontaneous and mediumistic case material could have provided years ago is not saying very much for the way we have been going.

Perhaps our most urgent need is to try to understand ourselves and (even if this sounds a bit too dramatic) the enemy within. It is conceivable that we have exerted ourselves to follow in the way of science not just because scientific method is after all a successful means of sifting information and error in many areas, but because we are prey to the very anxieties about ourselves and our nature out of which science, as a technique of coping, may in large part have developed (Eisenbud, 1966). Jean Bernard Foucault, the nineteenth-century French physicist who invented the gyroscope and is best known for his work on the refraction of light and the pendulum, once remarked, "If the influence of mind upon matter does not cease at the surface of the skin, there is no safety left in the world for anyone" (Inglis, p. 224). It is possible that much of today's penchant for white-collar research with white-collar psi is (quite apart from the fact that there do not seem to be enough Gellers, Kulaginas, and Serioses to go around) unconsciously aimed at keeping the influence of mind pretty close to the surface of the skin. This could be a sort of counterphobic maneuver, well known to psychiatrists, whose principal function is to provide the illusion of control while enabling one at the same time to keep a deeply feared possibility at arm's length. That it happens in this case also to be a highly successful way of keeping psi itself at arm's length (and a good deal of the time null and void) is no secret. However this may be, there are many indications today that life and mind are returning to the sciences. If parapsychology is to lead the way instead of joining the parade at the rear as a wooden caricature of the science of yesterday, it can not deny—nor fail to capitalize upon—its unique heritage in case material of the spontaneous variety.

Now back to Inglis's book. An immense amount of material has been covered and on the whole, in my judgment, covered prodigiously well. Much more of it deserves comment than I have been able to touch upon in these pages. Inevitably there will seem to this or that reader inequalities in the treatment of different subjects or individual actors in the drama. (One topic I would like to have seen presented more fully and in greater depth is that of suggestion, or "willing," at a distance, one of the "higher phenomena" of mesmerism and hypnosis, to which Inglis devotes 73 of his 450 pages. This, to my mind, is the most under-researched and theoretically

most under-deployed phenomenon and hypothesis, respectively, in the whole of parapsychology.) But for any synthesizer to have put the material dealt with into some sort of historical framework and to have shown the behind-the-scenes forces and counterforces at work in the emergence of psychical research out of magic, alchemy, witchcraft, "miracles," and old wives' tales was a task of no mean magnitude.

The one maddening thing about the book, a curse for any serious scholar, is the absence of precise references, and at times even dates, pertaining to the accounts cited. Instead we have a list of several hundred books and periodicals consulted and a note under "Sources" stating that "I have usually identified the source of a quotation or a report in the text by saying who was responsible for it, and (where relevant) when and where it appeared." This is a decidedly over-generous evaluation of the term "usually," and a rather one-sided if not regal (*L'état, c'est moi*) conception of "relevant." The fact is that one can go on for page after page sprinkled with names, assertions, and shorter or longer direct quotations, some, with indented margins, of ten or twelve or even more lines, with no sign of a source or date. Small comfort to be assured by Inglis that "for anybody who wants more precise references, not only to the source but to later commentaries, I am depositing copies of the book in the libraries of the Societies for Psychical Research in London and New York, with book/article page references written in, in the margins." I wrote to one of these for selected references (after tossing a coin to determine which one) and have received no reply up to the time of this very sentence (several weeks). I don't doubt that every person who fancies himself a writer (and not necessarily a writer in Inglis's class at that) can sympathize with an author who is loathe to see his prose defaced either by frequent parenthetical references to names and dates (see earlier in this review) or by footnotes which cannot but distract the reader in full stride and maybe spoil for him the even flow of the text. But there are options less radical than asking the reader to write to London or New York every time he wants a precise bibliographic reference (or to do the sort of thing I did when I went through every issue of every volume of the *Zoist* vainly—though I can't swear to any computer-like thoroughness—trying to find the case of Angélique Cottin mentioned earlier). In this sense, if ever a book was marred by omissions, this is one. I can suggest only that the reader have at hand Fodor's *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (1966) or Shepard's *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (1978)

in order to glean from them, if he can, whatever references and dates he may need before the snows come. (I would suggest also, if the reader is especially punctilious, that he check Inglis against these sources, as here and there he may find some differences, or at least somewhat different treatments of a given topic or person.)

As to outright errors—it would be highly unusual if there were none—I am depositing with the editor of this journal a short list of the few (most of them trivial, one or two, not) that I was able to pick up. For “anybody who wants more precise references” to these, I can suggest only that he (or she) read this fascinating book and play the game for him (or her) self.

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